CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

MACHIAVELLI

The Prince
CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

Series editors
RAYMOND GEUSS
Professor of Philosophy, University of Cambridge
QUENTIN SKINNER
Professor of the Humanities, Queen Mary, University of London

Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought is now firmly established as the major student textbook series in political theory. It aims to make available to students all the most important texts in the history of western political thought, from ancient Greece to the early twentieth century. All the familiar classic texts will be included, but the series seeks at the same time to enlarge the conventional canon by incorporating an extensive range of less well-known works, many of them never before available in a modern English edition. Wherever possible, texts are published in complete and unabridged form, and translations are specially commissioned for the series. Each volume contains a critical introduction together with chronologies, biographical sketches, a guide to further reading and any necessary glossaries and textual apparatus. When completed, the series will aim to offer an outline of the entire evolution of western political thought.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see end of book.
MACHIAVELLI

The Prince

EDITED BY
QUENTIN SKINNER
Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge

AND
RUSSELL PRICE
Senior Lecturer in Politics,
University of Lancaster
Contents

Editors’ note ............................. vii
Introduction ............................ ix
Principal events in Machiavelli’s life .... xxv
Bibliographical note ........................ xxix
Translator’s note .......................... xxxii
Map: northern and central Italy, c. 1500  xxxvi
Dedicatory letter: Niccolò Machiavelli to His Magnificence Lorenzo de’ Medici ... 3

I The different kinds of principality and how they are acquired ... 5

II Hereditary principalities .................. 6

III Mixed principalities ...................... 6

IV Why the Kingdom of Darius, conquered by Alexander, did not rebel against his successors after Alexander’s death ... 15

V How one should govern cities or principalities that, before being conquered, used to live under their own laws ... 17

VI New principalities acquired by one’s own arms and ability ... 19

VII New principalities acquired through the power of others and their favour ... 22

VIII Those who become rulers through wicked means .... 30
Contents

IX The civil principality 34
X How the strength of all principalities should be measured 37
XI Ecclesiastical principalities 39
XII The different types of army, and mercenary troops 42
XIII Auxiliaries, mixed troops and native troops 48
XIV How a ruler should act concerning military matters 51
XV The things for which men, and especially rulers, are praised or blamed 54

XVI Generosity and meanness 55
XVII Cruelty and mercifulness; and whether it is better to be loved or feared 58

XVIII How rulers should keep their promises 61
XIX How contempt and hatred should be avoided 63
XX Whether building fortresses, and many other things that rulers frequently do, are useful or not 72

XXI How a ruler should act in order to gain reputation 76
XXII The secretaries of rulers 80
XXIII How flatterers should be shunned 81
XXIV Why the rulers of Italy have lost their states 83
XXV How much power fortune has over human affairs, and how it should be resisted 84

XXVI Exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarian yoke 87

Appendix A Letters relevant to The Prince 93
Appendix B Notes on the vocabulary of The Prince 100
Biographical notes 114
Index of subjects 141
Index of proper names 148
Editors’ note

The division of labour between us has been as follows. The Introduction was written by Quentin Skinner, who also compiled the Bibliographical Note and the list of Principal Events in Machiavelli’s Life. But he is greatly indebted to Russell Price for the many helpful suggestions he made about each of these parts of the book. For commenting on drafts of the Introduction he would also like to express his warm thanks to Raymond Geuss, Susan James and Jeremy Mynott.

The translation is the work of Russell Price, who is also responsible for the annotations to the text, the Appendices, the Biographical Notes and the Indexes. But he in turn wishes to acknowledge his great debt to Quentin Skinner for checking the whole of the translation and for commenting on his other contributions to the book. He is also very grateful for the help received from several other friends, which has contributed greatly to improving the translation. He is especially indebted to Paolo L. Rossi, who checked most of it. He also wishes to thank Francesco Badolato, Luciano Cheles and Michael Oakeshott for commenting on some chapters, and for advice, as well as Bruna Isella and Rev. Giovanni Rulli, S. J., for advice on some points, and Harro Höpfl for help in correcting the proofs.
Introduction

Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469. He received his early education from a well-known teacher of Latin, Paolo da Ronciglione, and may subsequently have attended the University of Florence. After that, however, almost nothing is known about him until 1498. In the spring of that year the regime dominated by Savonarola fell from power in Florence. A new city government was elected, and Machiavelli was one of those who rose to prominence in the wake of the change. Although he appears to have held no previous public office, he suddenly found himself installed both as head of the second Chancery and as secretary to the main foreign relations committee of the republic, the so-called Ten of War.

Machiavelli served the Florentine republic for over fourteen years, during which he was sent on a number of diplomatic missions on behalf of the Ten. In the course of these embassies he wrote a large body of official reports, trying out many of the ideas he was later to develop in his political works. He also came into direct contact with many of the political leaders whose policies he subsequently analysed in the pages of *The Prince*, including Louis XII of France, Cesare Borgia, Pope Julius II and the Emperor Maximilian.

Machiavelli’s public career came to an abrupt end in the summer of 1512. During the previous October the Pope had signed the Holy League with Ferdinand of Spain. Entering Italy in the spring of 1512, Ferdinand’s troops first drove the French out of Milan. Then they turned against Florence, the traditional ally of the French. Faced with the sack of their city, the Florentines capitulated at the end of August. The Medici family, in exile since 1494, returned to its earlier position
Introduction

of controlling influence in the city, and soon afterwards the institutions of the republic were dissolved.

Machiavelli's own misfortunes began in November, when he was formally dismissed from his post in the Chancery. (Why he was suddenly removed, however, remains something of a mystery, especially as some of his friends survived the change of regime without apparent difficulty.) A second blow fell in February 1513, when he was accused of taking part in an abortive conspiracy against the new regime. At first he was imprisoned and tortured, but soon afterwards he was released and allowed to retire to his farm. From there, in December 1513, he wrote a famous letter to his friend Francesco Vettori about his new life. I have been making it bearable, he reports, by studying ancient history, and at the same time pondering the lessons to be gleaned from long years of government service. As a result, he says, 'I . . . have composed a little book On Principalities, in which I delve as deeply as I can into this subject' (p. 93). The little book is The Prince, which Machiavelli drafted – as this letter indicates – in the second half of 1513 and completed by the end of that year.

The Prince opens with the observation that all forms of dominion are either republics or principalities (Ch. I). But Machiavelli at once adds that he will concern himself exclusively with principalities, concentrating on the best methods of governing and holding on to them (Ch. II). His aim in doing so, as his opening Dedicatory Letter explains, is to show the Medici how to scale the heights of greatness. One of his hopes, he adds, is of course to win their favour by advising them on how this can be done. But his main aspiration – as he makes clear in the Exhortation to the Medici which brings The Prince to a close – is that if they follow his advice, the result will be to bring honour to their illustrious family and benefit to the people as a whole.

As Machiavelli points out at the start of Chapter XII, the first eleven chapters of his book form a unity. He begins by distinguishing three different types of principality, and proceeds to analyse the different methods of acquiring and maintaining them. First he considers hereditary principalities, but only to note that these pose few difficulties (Ch. II). Next he turns to what he calls mixed cases, those in which a ruler annexes a new possession to existing territories (Ch. III). This is where problems begin to arise, especially if the two principalities are in different areas and lack a shared language or system of laws.

Chapter III is given over to contrasting the Roman way of proceeding
Introduction

in such cases with the methods recently employed by Louis XII of France in attempting to hold on to his new possessions in Italy. The first and most effective policy, Machiavelli insists no less than three times, is for the ruler of such a composite principality to go and live in his new territories. Thereafter he must devote himself to undermining his stronger neighbours while protecting the weaker ones. The Romans always acted in this fashion, as a result of which they never lost control of new provinces. But Louis has done exactly the opposite, as a result of which he has just been hounded out of Milan for the second time.

Newly acquired territories will either be accustomed to living under a prince (Ch. IV), or else will be self-governing republics used to living ‘in freedom’ (Ch. V). Territories of the former type are relatively easy to hold, provided that the previous ruler was someone who exercised total political control. But conquered republics are very hard to maintain, for they always display ‘greater vitality, more hatred, and a stronger desire for revenge’ (p. 19). A new ruler must either destroy them completely, or else be sure to go and live there, while at the same time allowing their citizens as many as possible of their old laws.

Machiavelli next turns from rulers who gain control of new territories to the contrasting case of private citizens who become rulers for the first time. He considers five different ways in which this transition can be effected, arguing that the obstacles a new prince can expect to encounter will largely depend on the manner in which his principality was first obtained.

One method of becoming a prince is by virtù and the force of one’s own arms (Ch. VI). Principalities are hard to acquire in this way, but easy to hold once acquired. A second method is to gain power – as Cesare Borgia did – by good fortune and the arms of others (Ch. VII). Such rulers attain their positions with ease, but hold on to them only with the greatest difficulty. A third way is to come to power by crime (Ch. VIII). Machiavelli offers as his main example Agathocles of Sicily, who seized control of Syracuse after butchering the entire senate. A fourth way is to be chosen by one’s fellow-citizens (Ch. IX). Princes of this type generally find little difficulty in holding on to power, provided they are able to retain the goodwill of those who originally chose them. Finally, a fifth method of rising from the status of a private citizen to that of a ruler is to be elected pope (Ch. XI).

Machiavelli presents this classification in a self-consciously cool and
Introduction

abstract style. When he discusses the attainment of power by crime, he
remains that he will not enter into the merits of the case, since his
examples ‘should be enough for anyone who needs to imitate them’ (p.
30). And when he ends by discussing the Papacy, he insists on treating
that august institution – in a manner that must certainly have startled
his original readers – as nothing more than one of the various principal-
ities contending for power in Italy.

Nevertheless, there is something deceptive about Machiavelli’s
presentation of his case. He is careful to develop his typologies and put
forward his precepts in wholly general terms. But the factors he
chooses to emphasise suggest that, at several crucial points, what he is
really thinking about is the situation in Florence.

This becomes evident as soon as we recall the position of the Medici
at the moment when Machiavelli was writing The Prince. At the time of
their reinstatement in 1512, the Medici had been living in exile for
eighteen years. They had thus spent most of their lives as private
citizens. Moreover, the city to which they returned had been a self-
governing republic throughout the intervening period. Finally, they
owed their reinstatement not to their own virtù, but to sheer good
fortune combined with the foreign arms supplied by Ferdinand of
Spain.

This is to say that the Medici found themselves in the predicament
Machiavelli considers most dangerous of all for a new prince. He is
very emphatic in Chapter VII about the problems encountered by those
who suddenly come to power by luck or favour in combination with the
force of foreign arms: ‘like all other natural things that are born and
grow rapidly, states that grow quickly cannot sufficiently develop their
roots, trunks and branches, and will be destroyed by the first chill winds
of adversity’ (p. 23). He insists in Chapter V that these problems will be
even graver if their principality was previously a republic. For in
republics ‘they do not forget, indeed cannot forget, their lost liberties’
(p. 19). Beneath the surface generalities of Machiavelli’s text, a highly
specific note of warning – possibly even of Schadenfreude – is clearly
audible.

A similar point can be made if we consider how the Medici con-
ducted themselves in Florence during the years immediately after their
return. Giuliano de’ Medici, the man to whom Machiavelli originally
dedicated The Prince, was at first sent to take control. But the head of
the family, Pope Leo X, recalled him to Rome as early as April 1513.
Introduction

Giuliano's nephew Lorenzo, to whom Machiavelli rededicated his book after Giuliano's death in 1516, was thereupon sent in his place. But he too spent little time in the direct supervision of the city's affairs. He was absent from September 1514 until May 1515, and again for much of the rest of that year; he was absent again from October 1516 until the spring of the following year, and he died less than two years after that.

Throughout the period when Machiavelli was writing and revising *The Prince*, the Medici were thus behaving in just the manner that Machiavelli felt to be the height of imprudence. As we have seen, Chapter III argues that Louis XII's failure to go and live in his newly conquered Italian territories was one of the main causes of his losing them so rapidly. Chapter V adds that, in the case of new possessions which have previously been republics, it is absolutely indispensable either to destroy them or else to go and settle in their territories. Once again, an undercurrent of specific warning and advice appears to lie beneath the surface generalities of Machiavelli's text.

At the start of Chapter XII Machiavelli announces a new theme. Having discussed the various types of principality, he now turns to the figure of the prince. Unless a new prince builds firm foundations he will always come to grief. But the main foundations of any government are good arms and the good laws that arise out of them. The first and most basic topic to be considered must therefore be the prince's methods of defence.

Taking up this question in Chapters XII to XIV, Machiavelli makes two fundamental points. The first is that no prince can be said to have good arms unless he raises his own troops. And in speaking of *arme proprie*, as he explains at the end of Chapter XIII, what Machiavelli means are armies ‘composed of subjects or citizens or of one’s dependents’ (p. 51). This is one of Machiavelli’s cardinal beliefs, and it underlies practically everything he says about the best means of gaining and holding power. Chapter VI had already warned that even the greatest virtù will never be sufficient to maintain a new ruler unless he can also defend himself without the help of others. Chapter VII had declared that the first task of those who win power by favour or fortune is – as Cesare Borgia had recognised – to raise their own troops. And in Chapter XI Machiavelli had sardonically added that, although we cannot enquire into the workings of the Papacy, since it is controlled by a higher power, we can certainly ask why it has grown so rapidly in
Introduction

stature of recent years. The answer, once again, is simply that the popes have ‘made it great by the use of force’ (p. 42).

Machiavelli’s argument constitutes a frontal attack on the advice-books for princes published by a number of his contemporaries. Giovanne Pontano, for example, writing his treatise on The Prince in the 1490s, had affirmed that any ruler who is loved by his subjects will never need to maintain an army at all. Machiavelli never tires of insisting that, on the contrary, sheer force is indispensable to good government. He not only makes this the principal theme of these central chapters on military affairs; he also reverts to the same topic in the last three chapters of his book.

These closing chapters begin by considering the various rulers who have recently lost power in Italy (Ch. XXIV). In every case, Machiavelli stresses, their first and basic failing was their ‘common military weakness’ (p. 83). This makes it absurd for them to claim that they have been the victims of sheer ill-fortune. The power of fortuna, as the celebrated discussion in Chapter XXV goes on to explain, need never control more than half our actions. They have lost their positions in consequence of lacking the kind of virtù with which Fortune can alone be opposed, and in particular the kind of military virtù needed for the successful defence of one’s territories. The final Exhortation to the Medici largely echoes the same refrain: ‘If your illustrious family, then, wants to emulate those great men who saved their countries, it is essential above all else, as a sound basis for every campaign, to form an army composed of your own men’ (pp. 89–90).

Machiavelli’s argument is also directed against the prevailing conduct of warfare in Italy. With the increasing refinement of urban as well as courtly life, most princes had given up attempting to muster their own armies and turned to the employment of mercenary and auxiliary troops. Against this practice Machiavelli speaks out with intense vehemence. Mercenaries are ‘useless and dangerous’; the ruin of Italy ‘has been caused by nothing else than the reliance over so many years on mercenary armies’ (p. 43). Borrowed auxiliaries are even worse; if they lose they ruin you, but if they win they leave you at the mercy of the foreign ruler to whom they owe their basic allegiance (Ch. XIII).

Machiavelli’s other main contention about the prince’s military duties forms the subject of Chapter XIV. A ruler must always think and act essentially as a warrior, and above all take command of his armies
Introduction

himself. This too constitutes a sharp break with the usual values of Renaissance advice-books aimed at princes and their followers. Consider, for example, Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, drafted a few years before The Prince. Castiglione argues that, even among those whose profession is arms, warlike attitudes must of course be set aside in time of peace in order to cultivate the arts and refinements of civilised life. Machiavelli grimly points to the consequences of adopting such an attitude: ‘it is evident that if rulers concern themselves more with the refinements of life than with military matters, they lose power’ (p. 52). A prince, he concludes, ‘should have no other objective and no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices’ (pp. 51–2).

Following this discussion of military affairs, Machiavelli announces at the start of Chapter XV that one further question still needs to be raised about the figure of the prince. How should he conduct himself towards others, especially his allies and his own subjects? Machiavelli’s answer occupies him throughout Chapters XV to XXIII, after which he concludes (as we have seen) by reverting to the topic of defence. The intervening chapters undoubtedly represent the most sensational and ‘Machiavellian’ sections of his book.

He begins by noting that ‘many people have written about this subject’ (p. 54). It is clear that he partly has in mind the advice-books produced by such prominent humanists as Patrizi and Platina as well as Pontano, all of whom had published treatises entitled The Prince in the course of Machiavelli’s own lifetime. As he subsequently indicates, however, he also has in mind a number of ancient treatises to which these contemporary writers owed their deepest intellectual debt. The most influential of these included Seneca’s book of advice to Nero, De clementia, and above all Cicero’s general treatise on moral duties, De officiis, whose precepts were frequently copied out by Renaissance moralists virtually word-for-word.

At the same time Machiavelli alerts us to the fact that his own analysis will involve him in repudiating this entire tradition of thought. ‘I fear that I may be thought presumptuous, for what I have to say differs from the precepts offered by others, especially on this matter’ (p. 54). The reason, he adds, is that he finds existing discussions somewhat unrealistic, and hopes to say something useful by attempting instead to ‘consider what happens in fact’ (p. 55).

The fact is that, whenever rulers are discussed, they are described
Introduction

as having a range of qualities for which they are either praised or blamed. Some are held to be generous, others miserly; some cruel, others humane; some untrustworthy, others faithful to their word – and so on in an extensive list of princely vices and virtues.

Turning to consider these qualities one by one, Machiavelli registers two rather different doubts. He first suggests that, although some of the attributes for which princes are praised are held to be good qualities, they only appear to be virtues. He first makes this point in connection with the supposed virtue of generosity, the subject of Chapter XVI. To gain a public reputation for being generous, a prince will have to consume all his resources in sumptuous display. So he will end up in the paradoxical position of having to load his subjects with additional taxes in order to sustain his reputation as a generous man. A prince who refuses to act in this way will at first be called a miser, but in course of time he will come to seem a man of truer generosity.

Machiavelli presents a similar paradox in Chapter XVII, the theme of which is the supposed vice of cruelty. Here he considers the behaviour of his fellow-Florentines in connection with the riots at Pistoia in 1501, a crisis he himself had been sent to investigate as secretary to the Ten of War. Wishing to avoid any accusation of cruelty, the Florentines had refused to punish the leaders of the factions involved. The result was that the disturbances turned into a general massacre. It would have been more genuinely merciful, Machiavelli insists, if the Florentines had instead made an example of the ringleaders at the outset, even though this would of course have led to accusations of cruelty.

Machiavelli’s main doubt about the conventional virtues, however, is a different and far more radical one. Everyone will agree, Chapter XV concedes, that it would be most praiseworthy if princes could in fact possess the full range of qualities usually held to be good. But the conditions of human life are such that this is impossible: ‘how men live is so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it’ (p. 54). It follows that a prince who wishes to maintain his position in a world where so many people are not good ‘must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary’ (p. 55).

Machiavelli devotes his ensuing chapters to explaining what he means by being prepared to act immorally. His way of proceeding at this critical juncture is to offer a point-by-point refutation of the
Introduction

conventional wisdom which had largely been inspired by Seneca’s and especially Cicero’s treatises.

First he reverts to the virtue of generosity (Ch. XVI). Cicero had opened his discussion of this quality in De officiis by declaring that nothing more befits the nature of man (I, 14, 42). Machiavelli begins by saying that, even if generosity is the name of a virtue, it can nevertheless do you great harm. Cicero had gone on to argue that the least suspicion of miserliness or avarice ought always to be avoided (II, 17, 58; II, 18, 64). Machiavelli argues that a wise prince will never mind being called miserly; he will recognise that it is one of the vices without which he cannot hope to sustain his rule. Cicero had repeatedly argued that generosity, together with justice, are the virtues that above all cause us to love those who possess them (I, 17, 56). A reputation for generosity in a leader always wins the intense affection of the people, whereas everyone hates those who discourage generosity (II, 17, 56; II, 18, 63). Machiavelli insists that it is the practice of generosity, not its discouragement, which eventually brings a prince hatred and contempt. And he notes – confronting theory with practice as he frequently does in these chapters – that in modern times great things have been done only by those princes who have had the reputation of being miserly.

Next Machiavelli turns to the vice of cruelty (Ch. XVII). The classic analysis of this evil, Seneca’s De clementia, had denounced cruelty as the characteristic vice of tyrants, and hence as the evil most of all to be avoided by true princes (I, 26, 1). Machiavelli retorts that a wise ruler will never mind being called cruel for any action which has the effect of keeping his subjects united and loyal. The accepted image of the true prince, one mainly derived from Seneca’s famous account, had pictured such a ruler as someone who avoids cruelty even when it might be expedient to embrace it. But Machiavelli insists that it is simply impossible for a prince, and especially a new prince, to avoid incurring a reputation for cruelty if he wishes to maintain his government.

Later in the same chapter Machiavelli considers the related dispute which arises, as he says, when one asks whether it is better for a prince to be loved or feared. Here he alludes directly to De officiis, II, 7, 23–4, where Cicero had discussed the best means to establish and secure power over others. To banish fear and hold fast to love, Cicero had affirmed, offers the best means to maintain our influence over other people and our own safety at the same time. Machiavelli responds with a flat contradiction: ‘it is difficult to achieve both and, if one of them has

xvii
to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved’ (p. 59). Cicero had gone on to add that there is no power so great that it can hope to last if it is upheld by fear (II, 7, 25). Machiavelli replies that, because men are in general so deeply self-interested, they will break the bonds of love whenever they find it useful, whereas fear of punishment will always hold them effectively.

Finally, Machiavelli asks how far a prince should honor his word (Ch. XVIII). Cicero’s De officis had treated it as axiomatic that the keeping of promises represents the foundation of justice (I, 7, 23). It had thus become proverbial to say that, even when dealing with our enemies, we must always regard our word as our bond. Machiavelli retorts that a prudent ruler ought never to keep his word if this would be contrary to his interests. And he adds – confronting theory with practice yet again – that in recent times the only princes who have achieved great things have been those who have set little store by the keeping of promises.

As Machiavelli develops this critique of classical humanism, it becomes increasingly evident that it is underpinned by a darkly pessimistic view of human nature. Men can never be expected to keep faith, Machiavelli declares, nor to behave well in any other way, unless they are made to fear the consequences of behaving badly. This perception in turn controls his handling of a further issue often discussed in Renaissance advice-books for princes, that of how rulers should conduct themselves towards their counsellors and others occupying positions of influence in their government.

Cicero had provided a much-quoted description in De officis of the qualities that make citizens worthy to occupy such positions of influence. They must be ready to devote themselves entirely to their country’s interests, and must never seek power or wealth on their own behalf (I, 25, 86). Discussing the same subject in Chapter XXII, Machiavelli makes clear his scepticism about whether such counsellors are anywhere to be found. There is only one way, he argues, to keep your advisers honest and trustworthy. You must load them with so many honours and so much wealth that they come to depend on you completely. This alone ensures that they keep faith with you and avoid looking for even greater rewards elsewhere.

If the usual advice-books for princes contain so many dangerously idealised precepts, what positive advice can be offered to new princes of a more realistic and hence a more useful character? This is the
Introduction

question Machiavelli begins to address at the end of Chapter XVIII, and it occupies him for the remainder of this part of his book.

Machiavelli may be said to offer two main precepts which, he claims, will enable a new prince who follows them to rule with no less assurance than a well-established one. The first, which arises directly out of his critique of the mirror-for-princes literature, is initially put forward at the end of Chapter XVIII. It is good actually to possess all the qualities usually held to be admirable. And even if (or rather, especially if) you do not in fact possess them, it is absolutely essential that you should appear to do so. But if you wish to maintain your position, it is no less essential that you should be prepared to disregard the conventional virtues and 'be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary' (p. 62).

This doctrine embodies two further and especially pointed allusions to the usual humanist pieties. The first is contained in the suggestion that princes must always appear virtuous, and must therefore learn how to dissimulate. Cicero had sternly warned in De officiis against assuming that true glory can ever be gained by vain displays or hypocritical talk. All such pretences fall to the ground as quickly as fragile flowers, for nothing counterfeit possesses any lasting quality (II, 12, 43). Machiavelli satirises these earnest sentiments with obvious relish. The truth is, he insists, that 'men are so naive, and so much dominated by immediate needs, that a skilful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived' (p. 62).

Machiavelli's other and even more pointed satire is contained in his suggestion that rulers must cultivate two natures — a good one which they should follow when possible, and a bad one which they must be prepared to follow when this is dictated by necessity. Cicero had already observed in De officiis that there are two ways of gaining one's ends. One is by argument, the other by force; the first is proper to men, the second only to beasts (I, 11, 34). Sharpening the distinction, Cicero had added that beastly methods, encompassing the use of fraud as well as force, are completely unworthy of men. Force reduces us to the level of the lion, fraud to that of the fox, and both must be avoided at all costs (I, 13, 41).

Taking up Cicero's discussion almost word-for-word, Machiavelli begins by agreeing that there are indeed two ways of contending, either by laws or else by physical force. He also agrees that the former method is proper to men, the latter to beasts. Then he springs his trap: 'but
Introduction

because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter’ (p. 61). This means that a prince, being committed to beastly methods, ought to know which beasts to imitate. Turning Cicero on his head, Machiavelli puts forward his celebrated advice: a prince will do best if he learns to ‘imitate both the fox and the lion’ (p. 61).

Summarising this part of his argument, Machiavelli reiterates that wise princes are governed not by the requirements of the conventional virtues but rather by necessity. Specifically, they understand that it is often necessary to act contrary to the conventional virtues in order to maintain their government.

This point can also be expressed in a different way that brings out more effectively the radical character of Machiavelli’s argument. As we have seen, when Machiavelli first considers in Chapter VI the range of qualities that enable a ruler to gain power and hold it with a minimum of difficulty, he uses the general term virtù to describe the qualities required. One way, therefore, of describing Machiavelli’s ideal is to say that it embodies a new conception of how the crucial concept of virtù should be understood. A prince who knows how to maintain his government – and is therefore to be accounted a true virtuoso – will be ‘prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him’ (p. 62). To be a truly virtuoso prince is to be willing and able to do whatever is necessary for the preservation of one’s government. So Machiavellian virtù consists in a willingness to follow the virtues when possible and an equal willingness to disregard them when necessary.

Machiavelli announces his other main precept at the start of Chapter XIX. At this point he simply draws upon an observation that would have been familiar to most of his original readers from Aristotle’s Politics. Surveying the causes of revolution in Book V, Aristotle had concluded that monarchies, and especially new monarchies, usually collapse when their rulers come to be viewed either with hatred or with contempt (1312b). Machiavelli reiterates exactly the same argument. A new prince who wishes to maintain his state must ‘avoid anything that will make him either hated or despised’ (p. 63).

As Machiavelli stresses later in the same chapter, the same precept can also be expressed in a more positive way. A ruler who wishes to hold on to power must ensure above all that the whole populace, nobles and ordinary citizens alike, remain respectful and content with his government. As we have seen, Machiavelli had already argued in Chapter IX
Introduction

that, even when a prince is in some way chosen to rule, his only hope of securing his government will be to retain the goodwill of the people. He now makes that insight central to his argument. ‘Well-ordered states and wise rulers have always been very careful not to exasperate the nobles and also to satisfy the people and keep them contented; this is one of the most important things for a ruler to do’ (p. 66).

Machiavelli in turn applies this principle as a means of determining what should be said about two topical issues in Florentine politics. The first, taken up in Chapter XIX, concerns the danger of conspiracies. This was certainly a threat the Medici had good cause to fear. The Pazzi family had succeeded in assassinating Giuliano de’ Medici in 1478, and Machiavelli himself had been arrested, as we have seen, in connection with a further plot in 1513. But the menace, Machiavelli declares, can easily be contained. Conspiracy is so dangerous that those who engage in it only do so if they think their action will be popular. It follows that the best shield a prince can have against conspiracy is simply to ensure that he never falls out of favour with the people.

The other topical issue Machiavelli considers is whether princes should guard their territories with fortresses. This forms the theme of Chapter XX, in the course of which Machiavelli notes that, although the Sforzas have built fortresses and the Florentines have used them to hold Pisa, the Duke of Urbino and the Bentivoglio in Bologna have both preferred to raze them to the ground. Again Machiavelli offers his own judgement in his briskest style. If you fear the hatred of your own subjects you must certainly build fortresses. But even this policy cannot in the end protect you against popular discontent. Hence ‘the best fortress a ruler can have is not to be hated by the people’ (p. 75).

For Machiavelli, accordingly, the principal question that remains is how to ensure that you do in fact retain the goodwill of the people and avoid incurring their hatred or contempt. Aristotle had laid it down in his Politeia that rulers generally come to be hated as a result of confiscating the property of their subjects or violating the honour of their womenfolk (1311a–b). To this the Roman moralists had added that cruelty is another leading cause of hatred. As Seneca had put it in De clementia, cruelty always increases the number of a king’s enemies and eventually makes him hated and loathed (I, 8, 7; I, 25, 3). It is striking that Machiavelli completely ignores this latter argument. But it is even more striking that, in offering his own opinion about how to avoid hatred, he simply reiterates what Aristotle had already said. It is not
Introduction

difficult, he argues in Chapter XIX, for a prince to avoid becoming hated; all he need do is ensure that he commits no outrages against the property or womenfolk of his subjects.

Turning finally to the question of how to avoid contempt, Machiavelli again gives his answer in the form of an implicit commentary on his classical authorities. In this case, however, he reverts to his more usual stance as critic, invoking but at the same time largely dissenting from traditional patterns of argument.

In one way Machiavelli thinks it easier to avoid contempt than earlier writers had supposed. Aristotle had thought of contempt as chiefly visited on rulers who lead a life of debauchery and drunkenness. He had therefore counselled rulers to behave with studied moderation in matters of personal and especially sexual morality (1314b). Cicero and his followers had underlined the same judgement in an even more puritanical style, stressing that a life of what Cicero calls ‘decorum’ and temperance is indispensable for anyone engaged in public affairs.

Machiavelli clearly regards these considerations as an irrelevance. Although he mentions lasciviousness as one of the qualities for which princes are blamed, he never takes up the suggestion that this is one of the failings that can actually endanger princely government. And when he discusses the range of vices that carry no such danger, the most he is prepared to say is that one should guard against them if one can, but that ‘if one cannot bring oneself to do this, they can be indulged in with fewer misgivings’ (p. 55). The classical ideal of self-control is dismissed with a shrug.

In another way, however, Machiavelli regards the avoidance of contempt as more difficult than had usually been supposed. This emerges most clearly from his handling of yet another standard topic in the literature of advice-books for princes, the topic of flatterers and how to avoid them. One familiar answer took the form of suggesting that the prince should make it clear that he wishes everyone to tell him the unvarnished truth at all times. He should therefore present himself – as Seneca had advised in De clementia – as a man of affability, easy of approach and openly accessible to all (I, 13, 4). Turning to this issue in Chapter XXIII, Machiavelli points to an obvious danger with this approach. If everyone feels free to tell the prince whatever they like at all times, he will very soon lose their respect and become an object of contempt.

How then is contempt to be avoided? Machiavelli gives part of his xxii
answer in criticising the image of the affable prince in Chapter XXIII. A prince ought not to allow anything like complete freedom of debate; he ought only to listen to a few advisers, and ought only to consult them on topics he himself wishes to hear discussed. But the main part of Machiavelli’s answer seems to derive less from reflecting on the literature of advice-books than from observing the actual behaviour of contemporary rulers, especially the contrasting behaviour of the Emperor Maximilian and King Ferdinand of Spain. What makes princes appear contemptible, Chapter XIX declares, is seeming changeable, pusillanimous and irresolute. So to avoid contempt, Chapter XXI suggests, it is essential to avoid neutrality, a sure sign of weakmindedness. More positively, you must do what Septimius Severus did as Emperor of Rome and Ferdinand has done as King of Spain. You must undertake mighty schemes of a kind that keep the entire populace in a state of perpetual wonder and amazement.

Machiavelli largely presents his ideal of the virtuoso prince as a positive and creative force. Underlying his analysis, however, there is also a hint of Tacitean doubt. (It is perhaps significant that Tacitus is the one classical moralist approvingly cited for his wisdom in the course of The Prince.) Sometimes the ruler who is guided by necessity is pictured not as someone who uses his virtú to beat down the malice of Fortune, but simply as someone who successfully learns to adapt himself to political exigencies.

Machiavelli originally gave expression to this more sceptical outlook in a letter to his friend Giovan Soderini in 1506. Nature, he declares, ‘produces different kinds of mind and temperament’ by which we are all controlled. But times are varied and are subject to frequent change. So a man who wishes to enjoy good fortune will have to be ‘shrewd enough to understand the times and circumstances’ (p. 98). Writing The Prince seven years later, Machiavelli repeats these observations virtually word-for-word in his portrayal of Fortune in Chapter XXV. He begins by reaffirming that a prince can only hope to attain his ends if he manages to relate his ways of acting to the character of the times. But he now adds the blankly pessimistic suggestion that we can never hope to encounter anyone so prudent as to be able to adjust their behaviour in the appropriate way. The outcome is that, for all the magnificence of the rhetoric in the Exhortation that follows, Machiavelli ends on a fatalistic note. Since our circumstances vary, while our natures remain fixed, political success is simply a matter of having the good fortune to suit the spirit of the age.

xxiii
Introduction

Machiavelli is often described as a cynical writer, but this hardly seems an apt characterisation of The Prince as a whole. Consciously shocking though it often is, the work is passionately driven forward by a sense of what must realistically be said and done if political success is to be achieved. It is true, however, that a different and far more hollow tone is sounded towards the end. By concluding that political success may be nothing more than successful time-serving, Machiavelli takes leave of his readers on a genuinely cynical note.

Machiavelli undoubtedly hoped that The Prince would bring him to the favourable attention of the Medicean government. But in this he was disappointed. He was never entrusted with public office again, and spent the remaining fifteen years of his life as a man of letters. He first turned his attention to his Discourses on Livy, the work in which he developed his full-scale analysis of republican government. He then composed his treatise on The Art of War, his one work of statecraft to be printed during his own lifetime. Finally, he accepted a commission – ironically enough, from the Medici – to write his Florentine Histories, a task he completed some two years before his death in 1527.

Machiavelli’s later political writings were all more leisurely and expansive than The Prince. But perhaps for that very reason, The Prince has always exercised the greatest hold over the imagination of succeeding generations. It was there that Machiavelli first presented, with matchless clarity and force, his basic assumption that rulers must always be prepared to do evil if good will come of it. In doing so he threw down a challenge which subsequent writers on statecraft have found it almost impossible to ignore.
Principal events in Machiavelli’s life

1469  May: born (3rd) in Florence.

1481  November: begins to attend Paolo da Ronciglione’s school.

Late 1480s  Possibly attended lectures by Marcello Adriani at the University of Florence around this time.

1498  June: confirmed by Great Council as second chancellor of the Florentine republic.

July: elected secretary to the Ten of War.

November: mission to the ruler of Piombino, the first of a series of diplomatic missions undertaken by Machiavelli on behalf of the Ten.

1499  July: mission to Caterina Sforza-Riario.

1500  July to December: mission to court of Louis XII of France.

1501  Marries Marietta Corsini. (They eventually have six children.)

1502  October: mission to court of Cesare Borgia (Duke Valentino) at Imola.

December: follows Borgia to Cesena and Senigallia.

1503  January: returns from Borgia’s court.

April: mission to Pandolfo Petrucci, ruler of Siena.

October to December: mission to papal court at Rome to report on election of Julius II.

xxv
Principal events in Machiavelli's life

1504 January to February: second mission to court of Louis XII. 
   July: second mission to Pandolfo Petrucci.

1505 December: scheme for a revived Florentine militia, put forward 
   by Machiavelli, provisionally accepted.

1506 January: helps to recruit for the militia in the Mugello, north of 
   Florence.
   August to October: second mission to papal court; follows Julius 
   II from Viterbo to Orvieto, Perugia, Urbino, Cesena and Imola.
   December: Great Council establishes a new committee, the Nine 
   of the Militia, with Machiavelli as secretary.

1507 December: sent on mission to the Emperor Maximilian’s court.

1508 June: returns from imperial court.

1510 June to September: third mission to court of Louis XII.

1511 September: fourth mission to court of Louis XII.

1512 August: Spanish troops attack Florentine territory and sack 
   Prato.
   September: Florence surrenders; return of the Medici; dissolu-
   tion of the republic.
   November: Machiavelli dismissed from the Chancery (7th) and 
   sentenced (10th) to confinement within Florentine territory for 
   a year.

1513 February: accused of taking part in anti-Medicean conspiracy; 
   tried, tortured, imprisoned.
   March: released (11th) from prison.
   April: retires to his farm at Sant’ Andrea in Percussina, 7 miles 
   south of Florence.
   July (?) to December: writes draft of Il Principe.

C. 1515 Begins to frequent discussion-group presided over by Co-
   simo Rucellai in the Orti Oricellari, Florence. Dedicating his
Principal events in Machiavelli's life

Discorsi to Rucellai, Machiavelli implies that the book was written at Rucellai's behest and that it was discussed at these meetings.

1518 Writes Mandragola.

1518 or 1519 Completes Discorsi.

1520 Writes Arte della guerra and La vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca.

November: receives commission from Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici (later Pope Clement VII) to write the history of Florence.

1521 Arte della guerra published.

1525 May: visits Rome to present his completed Istorie fiorentine to Pope Clement VII.

1526 Revises and adds to Mandragola.

1527 June: dies (21st); buried (22nd) in Santa Croce, Florence.

1531 Discorsi published.

1532 Il Principe and Istorie fiorentine published.
Bibliographical note

Biography


Intellectual background


xxix
Bibliographical note

Political background


General studies of *The Prince*


Specific aspects of *The Prince*